

4/2/13

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U.S. dubs Al Aqsa Brigades 'terrorist'

Arafat, on TV, condemns attack

By Nathan Guttman and Amira Hass | Mar.22, 2002 | 12:00 AM

A downcast Yasser Arafat appeared on Palestinian TV last night and under heavy American pressure read out, in Arabic, a "vehement" condemnation of yesterday's Jerusalem bombing, as the U.S. declared that the Al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade was being added to the U.S. list of terrorist organizations, along with al-Qaida.

U.S. President George W. Bush said yesterday he was disappointed with the Palestinian Authority leader's response to calls for an end to attacks on Israel and there was only "a chance" the Palestinian leader would accept American terms for a cease-fire. "We've set some strong conditions," Bush said after Vice President Richard Cheney reported on his peacemaking efforts in the Middle East. "We expect Mr. Arafat to meet those conditions."

Later, at a rally in Texas on his way to Mexico, Bush said "too many people are losing their lives to murders ... We cannot let the terrorists take over freedom-loving societies, and we will not," he said. "America will fight terror wherever we find it. And we will call upon leaders around the world to do so as well. Mr. Arafat must do more to stop the violence in the Middle East," Bush said.

The president said he would send Cheney to see Arafat only if Zinni concluded the cease-fire accord arranged last year by CIA Director George Tenet could be restored.

Cheney, sitting alongside Bush in the Oval Office, said Zinni would make the judgment based on whether Arafat was carrying out the cease-fire. "If he's doing that, if he's living up to those requirements, and General Zinni signs off on it, then I'm prepared to go back almost immediately for a meeting. But it depends on whether or not Arafat is complying," Cheney said.

At the State Department, spokesman Philip Reeker said the administration was taking steps to designate Al Aqsa as a foreign terrorist organization. It is illegal for Americans to provide financial support for groups so designated. In interview for a PBS telecast Friday, Marwan Zoloum, a commander in the Al Aqsa Brigades, vowed "we will continue until we vanquish the occupation and until the creation of the Palestinian state. This is the message that the whole world has to understand."

Reeker said Secretary of State Colin Powell called Arafat yesterday after the bombing and said the time for him to act against violence is now. "The secretary told Chairman Arafat he must punish the leaders of organizations responsible for recent attacks, making sure those responsible are brought to justice," Reeker said.

At his headquarters in Ramallah on the West Bank, Arafat condemned the bombing, and promised to "put an end to such attacks" and work toward a cease-fire with Israel. Arafat also promised, "We will take the appropriate and immediate measures to put an end to such attacks."

"We condemn the action in west Jerusalem, particularly because it was aimed against innocent Israeli citizens," said Arafat, who went on to say that the PA "will continue to invest every effort to ensure the success of Zinni's mission and that of the 'Quartet' (envoys from the U.S., EU, UN, and Russia), to stop the escalation in violence and start the implementation of the Tenet understandings and the Mitchell recommendations, to bring permanent just peace, to end the occupation and guarantee a better future for our children and their children."

About two hours after the bombing, the official Palestinian news agency, WAFA, published a PA condemnation of the attack. In that statement, the attack was dubbed "dangerous and suspicious," meaning collaborators may have been behind it, and that "it does not serve our campaign for liberty and independent and ending the nightmare of occupation."

PA spokesmen were confused and angry about the attacks, especially after the bomber's identity became known - an Al Aqsa Brigade man, meaning affiliated with Fatah.

A session of the Palestinian cabinet was called last night with representatives of all political factions, to order them face-to-face to abide by a cease-fire.

Yasser Abed Rabo said that "we can not control everything. In effect, the destruction and mourning caused by the IDF operations in the last few weeks demands of us deeper political work to convince the military organizations to cease the attacks, and not only policing."

The PA is interested in reaching calm, he said.

But there was a huge gap between his rhetoric and that of Marwan Barghouti, the Fatah chief in the West bank, who said that "any effort and agreement that does not yield a complete withdrawal, a Palestinian state with its capital in Jerusalem, and a return of the refugees," is doomed to failure.

While the PA tries to improve relations with the U.S., Barghouti told Al Jazeera that the U.S. was responsible for the attack, because of its one-sided support for the terror regime in Tel Aviv. "And while the PA says it wants the Zinni mission to succeed, Barghouti said that the mission is doomed to fail, "because he is trying to dictate to the Palestinian side."

"Those days are over," said Barghouti, "when the U.S. could dictate arrests. Only if Zinni addresses his pressure to the aggressive occupier," he added, will he win cooperation from the Palestinians.